

Sermon on 3rd Sunday of Lent - 4th March 2018 – by Reverend Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Parish Church Wokingham

Reading: St John 2: 13 -22

“Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up”. Words of Jesus apparently about the Temple in Jerusalem but really speaking symbolically about his own body and his resurrection from the dead. Words uttered according to St John, just after Jesus had come into the Temple and had driven out the traders and money-changers with the words “Stop making my Father’s house a market-place”.

What Jesus did in the Temple I believe was a pre-meditated symbolic protest. It was an ancient tradition - the prophetic tradition - for God’s messengers to make a symbolic action to get their point across. To appreciate the significance of that protest, we need to remember the importance of the Temple in those days.

The Temple was the very heart of the religious system - the place where God’s presence and love for his people were focussed - it was a beating heart, prayers and sacrifices were offered continually without ceasing - even when Herod was rebuilding it, the worship went on. To come and make sacrifice at the Temple was to do what God wanted his people to do and to be put into a complete and right relationship with God - it was the most holy place.

But it was a flawed system like all human activities and it had developed its own custom and practice. And part of this practice was the provision of handy stalls in the Temple precincts where pilgrims from across the country could buy the animals and birds needed for their sacrificial offerings especially at this great festival of Passover. The system of selling animals for sacrifice and changing local currency into Temple currency was a well-established practice sanctioned by the Temple authorities. It was part of what you needed to do when you went to make your offerings at the Temple.

So, Jesus’ action was a clear challenge to the ruling religious elite of his day. He deliberately attacked the religious practice in the Temple and at Passover, the most holy festival of the year. Experts in the history of the time give us a clue as to why Jesus may have targeted these stalls. They had grown up in the Court of the Gentiles, the special area set aside for non-Jews, to such an extent that they crowded out the space. Instead of a worship area it had been turned into a market-place. Instead of the peace of God it was the noise of commerce which dominated this holy place. Non-Jews were therefore excluded from the Temple; the take-over of their courtyard in the Temple by these stalls denied them any space in God’s house. That didn’t trouble most locals; but it was a standing offence to Jesus. Those in charge of the Temple had narrowed and abused the vision of what the Temple was for. It wasn’t just an issue of different opinions about religious rituals or management of a building. It highlighted a deep-rooted wrong attitude. The religious rulers of the day had perverted the purpose of the Temple. They had made it into a symbol and an instrument of their power and domination of their society, when it was supposed to be a symbol of God’s lordship and rule over all peoples and human powers.

So, by turning out the stall-holders Jesus made a powerful statement of an alternative

message which was actually the true message – of hope and trust in God’s care for the whole world: God was the Lord of all; that was the true purpose of the Temple - to symbolise God’s presence to the whole world and to all people.

This was and remains a challenge to God’s people about priorities, about true purpose and seeking God’s way. There was also an assurance Jesus gave, that even if the whole edifice of the Temple was destroyed, and we know of course that the Temple was destroyed - God’s purposes will not – cannot - be defeated, there would be a new temple, but it will be his risen body, and the body of his followers.

This gospel has a message of challenge and also of assurance for Christians like us in the present time.

There has been a sense for some time – some decades really – that the church has lost touch with too many people and groups in society – or they have lost touch with the church and the Christian faith and vision of life. And this leads to the conclusion that if we are to respond as a church we need to change how we do things – because clearly carrying on doing things the way we have been isn’t reaching people like it needs to. And whenever changes are looked for it is a good thing to get back to the true priorities, the source and the spring of what church and faith are really about. Last year we were remembering the start of Protestant Reformation 500 years ago in 1517 and at a time when the Church as seen to have lost sight of its true purpose Martin Luther and others re-focussed on the source of Christian faith in the Bible and the gospel message.

Jesus protested strongly against a Temple which had grown used to keeping the blessings of God to itself – he protested against a Temple which was so preoccupied with its own life and culture that it crowded out the Gentiles and the seekers – so that they could no longer have their space with God; and in so doing actually it crowded out God.

I remember once in another diocese I went to cover some services at one of the local churches. I noticed as I signed the registers that in the whole of the preceding year there had only been six baptisms! This was a large parish in a town full of families, so I was baffled. Was this an especially godless place I wondered. No – later I found out the Vicar of that parish would not baptise any children unless their parents attended church six Sundays in a row. If they missed one of those Sundays, they had to go back to square one – so very few families ever had children baptised. I had assumed that the cause of such apparent disinterest in the church was the unchristian attitude of the local community. But the truth was that the reason for the lack of baptisms was in the hands of the church itself – it was the church itself that was preventing its parishioners from accessing the grace of God.

Though Christians and church members we are still also members of our wider society with all its own culture and priorities – and chief among those priorities is the claim that the making of money and the protection of its value makes upon us. Is it very surprising the church is weak, and the presence of God is given so little public recognition, especially in those organisations which shape and influence our society, in a society so strongly dominated by the market-place. Jesus’ words about the Temple - the house of God – turned into a market-place , might be a comment on the whole of our society now.

In a world dominated by wealth accumulation and self-interest the Christian message of spiritual values - of the priority of grace and love and generosity - is a poor and vulnerable message; and even we who have responded to that message are weak in resisting the power of the alternatives.

But we can take heart. Let us not judge "church" by false standards - let us not think that God despises us or has abandoned us because we are weak. But also let us hear the challenge to get our priorities as God's people right. God is sovereign not only over the church, but over the whole world and over the whole of our lives.

The still small voice of God's Spirit is heard in the wider community too – not everyone is caught up in the worship of money - and there are many people seeking something – they do not always know what it is.

Yet as the Church we do recognise that we are not only the solution, in some aspects we are also the problem. Who have we crowded out of access to God's presence and grace by our adherence to our own culture and life irrespective of its effect on others? How can we change that? because we surely do want to change that.

Our gospel assures us that God is in charge – God is Lord and God is the one who raises us up.

We are called to seek God and God's purposes first – the bishop of Oxford describes this as becoming a more contemplative church – spending time listening to God and listening to those around us - which are disciplines we have been introduced to over the last two years at All Saints through our participation in the Partnership for Missional Church. As we do that faithfully then I believe that God will lead us and show us how to be part of the process of opening up new spaces for God and welcoming people into God's presence.

END